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ABSTRACT

The approach to the study of black English usage that is based on a theory of linguistic differences between blacks and whites is inadequate, because it ignores the socioeconomic aspects of dialects. It does not resolve the problems that exist in schools for students who use black English regularly. The issue is made more complex since linguistics disagree about the nature of black English, who uses it, and the aims and strategies of instruction most suitable for those speakers. Teacher training programs should be based on a "social-contextual" approach to communication. Students should be taught to be eloquent in varied communication situations. Further, all speakers of English, in spite of wide varieties of dialect, share a basic common written language, and linguistic differences are a result of social and cultural differences in all segments of English-speaking societies. Teachers should seek understanding of the various backgrounds and value systems that form the contexts of individual communication situations. (RN)

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IS DEPRIVATION LINGUISTIC?

Suggested Changes for Teacher Training Programs Concerned with Black English*

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ABSTRACT

A linguistic approach to black English ("difference theory") is preferable to many of its predecessors, but it cannot resolve the problems which exist in schools for children who speak that dialect. Linguists disagree about the nature of BE, who speaks it, the aims of instruction most suitable for speakers of BE, and the strategies most appropriate for such instruction. Finally, the best advice that linguists can offer about BE is that we should on many occasions try to ignore its linguistic dimensions and concentrate upon its social dimemsions. For these reasons, a linguistic perspective, taken by itself, is an inadequate base for training programs designed to help teachers cope with BE.

The present paper describes an alternative description of BE based upon contexts shared by speakers of various dialects. Teacher training programs should build awareness of shared contexts within speech situations rather than of details of linguistic performance.

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IS DEPRIVATION LINGUISTIC?

Suggested Changes for Teacher Training Programs Concerned with Black English

Although the problem of why poor black children "talk funny," do not learn to read, and tend to fail in school is one which has undergone constant redefinition during the past decade, and although scholars have parlayed these redefinitions into fair quantities of federal money, none of these redefinitions has significantly improved the prospects of the subject population for language-arts success. We still lack a framework sufficient for training teachers to resolve the problem.

Once, black children were thought simply to be poor and probably of substandard intellect. Later, when it became less fashionable to act racist, these children were redefined as deprived, the suggestion being that their parents did not care for them well. When this term sounded too harsh, scholars redefined the problem population as "disadvantaged" or cognitively deficient (Deutsch, 1964). Later, it became popular to suggest that this deprivation was primarily linguistic: that black children speak a substandard variety of English, characteristic of somewhat younger white children, and that this substandard language hindered scholastic success (Raph, 1967). Some linguists reacted to this formulation by pointing out that linguistics contains no machinery for declarin one language or dialect inferior to another, and that black speech was as reasonable and rule-governed as white speech (Labov, 1970). Today it is most fashionable to refer to the subject population (still failing in school) as simply linguistically <u>different</u>.

On the basis of this linguistically-oriented difference approach to black English (BE), it has been argued (Shuy, 1970) that in order for teachers ot succeed with black students, the teachers must achieve a rather detailed understanding of the BE language system. This suggestion has led to a proliferation of college courses and in-service workshops which aim to make teahcers at least receptively competent in BE.

This "difference" approach to the problem is more humanistic than its predecessors, but it shares with them the basic concept that the child speaker of BE is a kid with a big problem. He may possess a coherent linguistic system, but the system does not work in school, and unless the child learns standard English (SE) he will probably not be able to learn to read or get a job (Baratz, 1970).

Thus our redeifning puts us back where we were before--asking a black child to talk like white children and being disappointed that he doesn't. The redefinitions have made us increasingly able to <u>explain</u> the failures, but have not helped us <u>prevent</u> them. It helps us little to say "This kid can't learn because he's just linguistically different." It only will help when we can explain how he <u>can</u> learn.

In line with the above view point, the purposes of this paper are:

1. To show that by itself a linguistic perspective on BE is in principle unable to explain how the subject population can succeed, and therefore it provides an inadequate theoretical basis for teacher training programs about BE.

2. To suggest a more profitable perspective.

Weaknesses of a Linguistic Difference Perspective of BE

A linguistic perspective on BE generates many insights but it does not provide tools to conceptualize clearly either what BE is or what to do about it. Linguists agree that BE is a coherent system, but there the agreement ends. Some suggest that BE is a totally different language from SE (Loflin, 1967), or at least a radically different dialect with separate roots from SE (Stewart, 1968). Other linguists suggest that there are practically no differences between BE and SE on a deep structure level (Labov, 1970). Still others (Wolfram, 1969) take an intermediate position.

There is as much disagreement about how to educate a child who comes to school speaking BE. (Which raises parenthetically the fact that mahy black children do not.) Linguists agree that a child should not be humiliated or forced to reject his primary way of speaking (that is the child should become in some way bi-dialectal) but how or even why this should be done is controversial. Inspite of Shuy's (1970) hopeful forecast that linguistic theorizing would soon provide a clear framework for teaching strategies in such instances, the choice among the four alternative approaches to teaching reading which he listed in 1970 is no easier today. Here are the four alternatives Shuy offered:

1. Teach the child SE first in school (McDavid, 1964).

2. Accept dialect reading of traditional material written in SE (Goodman, 1965).

3. Develop materials in SE which minimize dialect differences (Venezky, 1970).

4. Develop materials which encorporate the grammar of black children (Stewart, 1969), or parallel sets of material in BE and SE (Davis, Gladney and Leaverton, 1969).

The linguistic difference approach to BE leads to all these approaches. No one of the approaches can claim to be a resolution to reading problems in the subject population. And all seem to raise hosts of problems, such as requiring teachers to be expert linguistic scholars--an unrealistic expectation.

Such a lack of concrete results raises the question of whether failure to read is a linguistic problem at all, or whether is simply results from home backgrounds in which parents and older peers do not read well or often, do not keep books in the house, and may be too poor to worry much about it. Whether or not this simplistic alternative hypothesis is helpful, my point is that linguistic theories of BE have not done notably better. The best advice that linguistic theorists seem able to offer is that a listener should accept intelligible speech from speakers of any dialect of his language because he understands the messages contained therein and understands the underlying uniformities between dialects (Labov, 1970; Shuy, 1970).

In other words, listeners should accept dialect differences due to BE as casually as they increasingly accept those due to residence in Texas or Boston or Australia. Put another ay, WE SHOULD IGNORE ON MANY OCCASION THE VERY INFORMATION WHICH LINGUISTIC APPROACHES SEEK TO CLARIFY. This is why linguistic approaches used by themselves are in principle insufficient for improving the language arts picture for our subject population of poverty-group black children. The linguistic approach has shown clearly that the problem is predominately a social one.

In fact dialects in general seem only to be important insofar as the perception by a listener that the speaker speaks "a dialect" (pejorative term) causes "leaping" to social decisions (Williams, 1970). Thus, lyndon B. Johnson began to worry about his dialect only when he considered running for national office. Thus, Shuy (1970) points out that speakers of BE and SE can understand each other's messages quite well--

What is at stake is the social status of the speaker, and only minimally is there communication loss (pp. 12-13). Even if there were significant losses of semantic information in cross-dialect communication, the fifty percent redundancy in our language (to which Shannon alerted us) easily allows for deciphering of messages--even for those teachers who still claim they "can't understand a word their students say" (Shuy, 1970; Kozol, 1967).

I do not deny that "linguistic bigots" will continue to discriminate against speakers of BE, or that well-meaning teachers who fail to ready their students to cope with such problems may do as much harm as good. I do aruge that dialect problems are socio-political-attitudinal, and that more cures may exist in the realm of attitude change theories than in linguistic theories about dialects. Exploration of this issue is outside the scope of this paper, but it raises some interesting empirical questions (see Watkins, 1971). "Deprivation," whatever it is, is not primarily linguistic.

ANOTHER RE-DEFINITION: DIALECTS AS CONVEYORS OF SOCIO-CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

I hope you are saying: "Oh good grief, not another redefinition!" (Or some nonstandard equivalent of your choice.) Past experience justifies such skepticism. But listen.

My method is eclectic. I have gathered here some propositions which are the best that linguists offer, and integrated them into a social framework.

The best of the linguistic approaches to BE support the following propositions:

1. Everyone speaks a dialect. Even you and I.

2. No dialect is linguistically better, more orderly, more communicative than any other.

3. No child or adult should be rejected or discriminated against solely because of the dialect he speaks.

4. One orthographic system serves with very minor modifications all English speaking peoples from Australia to Austin, from black to white. Therefore, speakers of any dialect of English can learn to use this writing-reading system, perhaps with less linguistic interference than is often supposed (Dale, 1972, p. 187).

5. Everyone's speech varies by the communication situations in which he finds himself. Such differences can often be described using linguistic measures as dependent variables, but the antecedents (independent variables) of such differences are primarily social.

To these propositions, I add some more general postulates which represent the best of linguistics since Chomsky's Syntactic Structures in 1957. Developmental psycholinguistic research based upon generative transformational grammar supports the following propositions.

1. Language is complex and rule-governed.

2. Children learn most of these complex rules at a phenomenally young age and with amazing rapidity. The child is a grammar machine--a language acquisition device. If children hear a language spoken, and are not prevented from learning to speak it, they will probably do so, before they enter school. (McNeill, 1970; Lenneberg, 1967).

3. Attempts to teach grammar to children, grammar machines that they are, are somewhat like trying to teach binary arithmetic to a computer or teaching the proverbial centipede how to run. The attempts are likely to be futile or harmful. (For some readers this assertion may be controversial, but I won't argue it here--see Hopper, 1973; or Hopper and Naremore, 1973.) The

only possibly useful method of grammar instruction is to confront children with situations in which particular meanings and grammatical entities are most appropriate (McNeill, 1965). This, of course, brings us back to manipulation of the communication situation--the social-contextual approach.

A social-contextual approach begins with the assumption that the communication situation is a fundamental unit of analysis in speech communication (Hymes, 1969). People speak differently in different situations due to constraints of the situations in which they find themselves (Williams and Naremore, 1969; Hopper, 1971). The variance existant in such situations can be described as sociolinguistic. Sociolinguistics, which often primarily classified as a study of social variations of speech according ot variables such as ehtnicity and social status, can be more generally defined as the study of linguistic consequesces of variations of social-situational contexts. Dialects are sociolinguistic phenomena and should be viewed primarily as carriers of social information about situations. Dialects of a language differ from each other largely in that different usages are most appropriate for particular speakers within particular contexts. In this vein, Williams and Naremore (1969) point out that one of the major differences between speakers of different social classes is that the latter tend to elaborate more--to go further beyond the specific demands of communication situations which require only simple answers Labov (1970) argues that differences between BE and SE are best described in similar terms. One unkind way to say this is that SE speakers talk a lot.

A more scholarly way is provided by what Erikson (1969) calls the "shared context principle." This concept refers to the fact that communicators who share many experiences and points of view can communicate with each other economically inwways which use their shared contexts as part of the message. The overt verbal behavior exchanged under such circumstances tends toward what Bernstien calls a restricted code, though there is not a distinct category of behavior which would label one as a speaker of such a code. Rather

> We can think of shared context as a continuum with "high shared context" at the other. High context communication (restricted code) is appropriate when there is considerable overlap of experiences between communicators, and low context communication (elaborated code) is appropriate when little experience is shared. As context increases the volume of necessary communication signals decrease (Erikson, 1969).

This point of view is important in two ways: 1. It denotes context as an independent variable in the use of social dialects, and 2. The criterion for effective communication is appropriatness--successful adaptation to the situation--which is code switching for purposes of adjusting to contexts. Erikson argues that both inner city and suburban teenagers whom he studiid shifted back and forth between relatively restricted and relatively elaborated codes, depending upon situational constraints. This suggests that labeling someone "a speaker of a restricted code" is a misnomer. He concludes that teachers who wish to understand black teenagers should attempt to share contexts implied by their speech, rather than striving to comprehend linguistic differences in dialect. I would extend this position to the statement that teachers of speakers of BE should understand:

1. The backgrounds and value systems of their students.

2. The importance of shared context in communication.

A child speaker of BE like any other child comes to school with an almost fully developed linguistic system of a dialect of English. He has also learned some things about rules of social interaction, and is able to vary his speech according to the demands of communication situations. Nevertheless, children do noe acquire these communication skills with the rapidity or facility which is evident in language acquisition (Hopper and Naremore, 1973). In other words, the young child learns to talk before coming to school, but he may have little to say, or be unable to speak effectively. Language acquisition is largely innate and can hardly be prevented. Eloquence and effective communication, ESPECIALLY WHEN THERE IS LITTLE SHARED CONTEXT BETWEEN COMMUNICATORS, are behaviors largely learned during school years, and they must be carefully taught.

What the child needs is less language arts and more training in communication skills. He needs training not in language, but in ways to us use it effectively and ethically. If a child receives such training, his language will be fine, and he will have something to talk about too.

CONCLUSIONS

The "Linguistic difference" approach to BE has been valuable as a catalyst for dialect research. It is also valuable because it is less openly objectionable than preceding redefinitions--much as such concepts as "neighborhood schools" or "freedom of choice" are better than old-fashioned segregation. Yet in the end, just as children in neighborhood schools remain racially segregated, a child spekaer of BE whose teacher understands the difference position and knows some BE is not much better off if the teacher's major goal is to force him to speak SE as of ten as possible.

Given a context-centered approach to BE, the scene shifts from one of coercion to speak a foreign dialect to one of learning to be eloquent in wide varieties of communication situations--using dialect switching as one tool. To implement such as approach, here are some things that teachers need to know:

1. BE is simply different from SE, and it is helpful to know some of the linguistic dimensions of these differences. It is probably useful in this context for prospective teachers to experience minimal comprehension training in BE, so that they will not be overwhelmed by its surface features.

2. All English speakers, from New York to New Zealand share a written language equally. There are speech writing misfits in all dialects. The child need not alter his speech in order to read or write.

3. Some social and cultural differences exist between cultural sub-segments of American society. It is helpful to know the cultural

and value backgrounds of your students. Much such information can be inferred from speech patterns and from what the students say about themselves.

This contextual information can be deduced from speech, and is a key dimenesion to differences between dialects of a language.

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